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THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD AND THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

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I. What is the Christian Gospel?

THE Christian gospel is that which is proclaimed concerning the meaning and value of the life of Jesus. Each gospeller says the gospel he proclaims stands written in the Bible in plain English for any one to read who will put aside his preconceptions and receive what is there. So declares the Christian Scientist, the Holy Roller, the old time Presbyterian, the Modernist, the Unitarian, and the Socialist. But they do not agree, hence they cannot all be right.

How can we ascertain which of the conflicting forms of the Christian gospel is most nearly true? If all are more or less mistaken, how can we discover that true meaning and value of the life of Jesus which, when known and proclaimed, will be the true gospel? We must seek answer to these questions by that method through which all matters of fact are ascertained, namely, the scientific method.

Four questions concerning the Christian gospel must be answered by the scientific method, if answered at all.

(1) What is the true significance of the life of Jesus?

(2) How must this meaning of his life be applied or received or used in order to derive the full benefit of it?

(3) What are the values which issue from it when it is so received or used?

(4) Should the Christian gospel be given supremacy

over every other form of wisdom concerning the way of life?

Let us explain the last question. Our final wisdom concerning the way of life, to be garnered after many centuries of human experience have been surveyed, criticized and interpreted, will not be the Christian gospel except in the sense that the life of Jesus will be one among many contributors to its consummation. Whether or not Jesus made the most important contribution will have to be ascertained, like every other matter of fact, by way of the scientific method.

II. What is the Scientific Method?

Scientific method can never be separated from tradition. It criticizes and reconstructs tradition but never breaks free from it. Scientific method is itself the product of ripened tradition. It consists of four parts as follows:

(1) Observation which discovers regular relations in the continuous change of events. (In case of historical investigation this observation must be through the reports of others.)

(2) Construction by the creative imagination of basic propositions which may serve to explain these observed relations.

(3) Logical deduction from these basic propositions, developing a total implicative system of further propositions.

(4) Further observation (and experimentation when possible) to see if this rational system of propositions is fully and accurately descriptive of that phase of events under consideration.

It should be noted that scientific method has two

sides, the rational and the empirical. The rational is represented by numbers two and three above, the empirical by one and four. The whole purpose of this method is to devise a rational system which will enable us to describe, predict, control, and explain all observable regularities in the thronging flux of events.

It should be further noted that the knowledge or "truth" achieved by it is highly tentative. This truth is never identical with the events to which it is applied. It is largely created by the imagination as an intellectual device or tool which serves to describe, predict, and control the course of events by regulating our adjustments to them. Also it provides satisfaction to our craving for rationality. But there is nothing absolute about such knowledge. Yet it is the most reliable we can ever have. The scientific method is not infallible. There is no way to render the human mind infallible. But it is the most trustworthy method at our command.

Finally it should be noted that no belief achieved by this method can be a saving faith. By saving faith we mean a supreme devotion to which we commit all and for which we live. No belief sustained by scientific method can provide us with such an object of loyalty because all such beliefs are tentative, merely intellectual devices. We must be ready to cast them aside at any time. But we cannot cast aside an object of supreme devotion which makes life worth living, because life would then no longer be worth living.

III. What is our Salvation?

Our object of supreme devotion cannot be an object of belief because the most reliable beliefs we have are

based on scientific method and these, we have seen, cannot give us such an object. We must find such an object in immediate experience, independent of belief and knowledge. Let us try to explain this suggestion.

When the scope of immediate experience is sufficiently widened and enriched it is good to live. All consummatory satisfactions are states in which conscious and semi-conscious experience is most wide and rich.[1] The substance of what we experience in these consummatory moments is not different from what we immediately experience at other times, but we experience it with sufficient breadth and fulness to find it satisfying.

Rationality and scientific method can be used to predict and control our personal and social adjustments to events in such a way that we may enter into this most satisfying experience of them; but rational knowledge must never be confused with the immediate experience of events themselves. The most important function of all scientific method and all gospels is to enable us to adjust to events in such manner as to experience them in this life-fulfilling way.

IV. Conclusion

The Christian gospel must be subjected to the tests of scientific method as described in Part I. On the other hand scientific method must be made to serve the intent of the gospel. That means to use scientific method to predict and control our personal and social adjustments to events in order that we may experience them in the most satisfying way. Love, for example,

[1] This thought is developed and illustrated in the writer's *Religious Experience and Scientific Method.*

is one of the chief modes of that adjustment which yields this maximum value of experience. In religious terminology this maximum value of experience is called salvation. If the Christian gospel means love, it offers such salvation providing it is appropriated scientifically.

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